Vet shortage getting shorter

By LORETTA SORENSEN

U NLESS strategic actions turn the tide soon, the number of veterinarians entering food-supply careers over the next 16 years won’t replace those expected to leave the industry through retirement or career changes.

Not only will this mean a shortage of vets in the countryside, but there also won’t be enough to fill federal and state positions designed to help control animal disease outbreaks and epidemics.

The shortage was predicted by the American Veterinary Medical Association following a recent comprehensive study. It was comprised of multiple research phases addressing the demand for and availability of food-supply vets in the U.S. and Canada.

Real example

One example of this can be seen at Dakota Large Animal Clinic in Harrisburg, S.D., where horses make up 90% of the business. The clinic is seeing fewer vet school graduates interested in treating large animals.

That decision involves a lot of variables, says veterinarian Nathan Earl.

“Intern issues we’ve seen include the fact that the majority of veterinary students today are women. If they intend to fulfill the traditional role of wife and mother, they struggle with the time commitment related to treating large animals.”

The AVMA study found that students planning to work in food-supply veterinarian practice have high levels of food-animal experience, a rural background and a desire to return to a rural community. They’re also interested in making valuable contributions to the nation’s food supply and helping producers make a profit.

Other tendencies include the fact that the majority are married men who are unconcerned with the physical aspects of the business and value relationships with others over material objects. Truth is, there aren’t many people left who fit these criteria.

While gender doesn’t limit capability, gender bias is an additional factor reducing the likelihood that women veterinarians will treat horses and cattle. Heather Lerseth, a 2007 graduate who practices at Groton, S.D., is an exception to that trend.

“My love of horses progressed in veterinary school,” she says. “About 80% of my classmates were women. Those that chose mixed- and large-animal practice were mostly men. I don’t see gender bias as a big issue, but there are producers who aren’t as comfortable with a woman veterinarian. If you’re used to working with horses and cattle, it helps.”

New emphasis

John Thomson, dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine at Iowa State University, says his institution is making every effort to improve facilities in spite of budget constraints stemming from current economic situations. Like other vet colleges across the nation, Iowa State also is working to recruit more students from declining rural populations.

“The majority of students come from urban areas, so they’re not growing up with large animals,” Thomson says. “Curriculums have been adjusted, and we have added a number of summer programs so students can get more hands-on large-animal experience now, and it’s showing positive results.”

David Hardin, associate dean at the Professional Program in Veterinary Medicine at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, says one effective strategy is informing prospective students that competition to enter vet school is less fierce than it used to be.

“You still need top grades, but there are some avenues to open doors for those who might have believed the program was too difficult for them,” Hardin says. “We’re also working to help them understand the opportunities they’ll find in rural communities.”

Special scholarships

Brad White, assistant professor at Kansas State University’s College of Medicine, says scholarships for medical students returning to rural areas to practice are attracting recruits. KSU also has developed special events to bring practicing large-animal vets in contact with students before they finalize career choices.

“At our career workshop, students and practicing veterinarians discussed positions and opportunities in rural communities,” White says. “The event has helped both students and practitioners.”

A total of 32 colleges of veterinary medicine in the U.S. and Canada will supply the necessary large-animal veterinarians over the next 16 years. Among the hurdles they face already is a shortage of experienced faculty.

“The problem is real and pressing. AVMA’s report indicates society and the nation’s economy will end up being the unequivocal loser if these problems are unsolved, and the projected pattern of shortages will continue,” Sorensen writes from Yankton, S.D.